



The Flowering of Toronto

The Toronto Flower Market thrives as a hub of local flowers, agriculture and inspired design.

Smiling faces of satisfied flower customers are a regular and welcome feature at the Toronto Flower Market.

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BY DEBRA PRINZING

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRISTIAN ORDONEZ AND TORONTO FLOWER MARKET

Natasa Kajganic isn't a florist or a flower farmer. But she does love flowers. So after being charmed by European street markets where blooms and bouquets seemed abundantly available, she returned home to Toronto and wondered, "Where is the flower market here?"

A freelance creative producer, Natasa's desire for a flower market was fueled by the memories of London's Columbia Road, where stalls spilled over with lush, colorful, just-picked varieties and shoppers walked the streets with armloads of flowers. Professionally, she knew how to leverage volunteers, logistics and marketing ideas and make something happen. And so, as a fully self-funded and grassroots creative project, she launched **Toronto Flower Market (TFM)** in May 2013.

"At the time, the city of Toronto had construction cranes everywhere. Development was going insane and all I could see was concrete," she recalls. "I wanted to bring the city to life with lush, green, colorful abundance. I wanted to create a cultural shift and promote the idea of flowers as a beautiful emblem of life."

As Toronto's first outdoor flower market, the pop-up event is now in its sixth season, from May through October, with special floral installations and collaborations sprouting up through the year. Truly a passion project for Natasa, TFM thrives because of a core team, including volunteers who take on project management, public relations and graphic design duties. "This is my creative outlet," she acknowledges.

"We've become a place in the city where people engage and discover the growth process of a flower or plant. It's more an experience than an event," Natasa explains.

TFM is at its core, a family of 30 flower, gardening and plant vendors who value working in a collaborative and mutually supportive business climate with the Ontario-grown mandate. Originally a once-a-month event, the project has expanded to nine market days this year.

TFM has been housed on a few temporary sites, not surprisingly because of Toronto's real estate boom. In 2016, a nonprofit health care organization invited Natasa to bring the flower market to a pocket park on its grounds. Here, the health care clients and the public mingle and experience the festivities. "There are children. There are men. There are old ladies who like to garden. It's not just the cool hipsters, but a spectrum of people drawn here because of the flowers," she says.

Natasa's top priority is to host Ontario flower growers and greenhouse nursery growers; she invites florists to periodically vend through the season, asking that they sell only locally sourced items, too.

In a way that farmers' markets often provide opportunity for food startups, TFM provides a low-cost, accessible way for florists to engage with Toronto consumers. "We're incubating quite a few floral businesses," Natasa says. "This is a true community. It's amazing that we have not tapped the whole market and still have potential to grow."



(Above) Jessica Gale of Sweet Gale Gardens (in hat), a flower farmer and floral designer who is an established Toronto Flower Market vendor, poses with market founder Natasa Kajganic on a recent Saturday.



(Above) A seasonal display of vibrant, field-grown flowers offered by Floradora Flowers, a sustainably-run flower farm and floral design studio.

(Below) Fresh, local and seasonal summer blooms from La Primavera Farms, an Ontario flower farm that regularly brings its harvest to Toronto Flower Market.



TFM Vendor Snapshots:

Amira Shabason

Kenilworth Floral @kenilworthfloral

Amira Shabason studied art history and has a background as a professional gardener. She embarked on her floral career at Toronto's **Coriander Girl**, one of the first "garden-inspired" retail florists in the city. Amira recently launched **Kenilworth Floral**, specializing in weddings and events, while also retaining a few gardening clients. "Because I'm a gardener, I like to keep my designs seasonally specific," she says. "The Market is an amazing, creative outlet. It allows me, for a couple of times each year, to make up my color palettes on the spot, based on what the growers have that week."

For the first market day of 2018, Amira designed hand-tied gift bouquets, tailored to Mother's Day gift-giving.

"The Market has become a ritual. There are people who come every time and they always buy themselves something," Amira says. "It's so nice to interact with people who obviously love flowers. Everyone's so happy and in a good mood when they're here."

To Amira, TFM is also a place to connect with friends in the business – flower farmers and fellow florists who have developed a community fostered by its founder Natasa Kajganic.

"A lot of us who have booths at the Market don't own brick and mortar locations, so it's a nice opportunity for all the events people like me to see one another, meet growers and see flowers in person," Amira says. "It's nice to spend an afternoon doing what I love – with others who are technically supposed to be my competition. I know it's rare and I don't want to take it for granted."

Sarah Nixon

My Luscious Backyard @mylusciousbackyard

Known as “Toronto’s Urban Flower Farmer,” floral designer **Sarah Nixon** has been growing and designing since 2002. **My Luscious Backyard** is an unconventional micro-farm established as a patchwork quilt of residential front and back yards in Toronto’s Parkdale and Roncesvalles neighborhoods.

“I grow a ton of flowers in a very small amount of space,” Sarah says. “These specialty cut flowers are organically grown (although uncertified) and range from beloved favorites like peonies and dahlias to unusual varieties rarely seen at a standard florist.”

During the summer months, she’s an in-demand wedding designer and maintains a regular CSA floral subscription service, in addition to farming on lots across the city. Sarah participated as an early Toronto Flower Market vendor and she’s returned for 2018.

“The first couple of years that I participated, I was bringing bouquets that I’d grown myself,” Sarah explains. “This year, I brought seedlings that I’d grown, along with my dahlia tubers.



Bouquets designed by Toronto florists are sold alongside fresh-cut bunches from Ontario flower farmers.

Jennifer Fowlow

Wild North Flowers @wildnorthflowers

Jennifer Fowlow’s small, independent floral studio is located in downtown Toronto. She is committed to using 100 percent Ontario-grown flowers, all year long, supplying Torontonians with custom-made flowers using the freshest seasonal blooms and foliage.

“Our main business is primarily daily orders, and we also design for weddings and events,” she explains. “When I started this two years

I had a great response and sold more than 500 flower seedlings, unusual flowers that shoppers wouldn’t be able to find in nurseries. This September and October, I’ll be back with cut dahlias – a gazillion of them.”

Natasa’s use of Instagram to generate pre-Market excitement for the flowers, seeds and plants that consumers will find there helps flower farmers and florists alike. “Even before I showed up this year, I had more clients because of that,” Sarah says.

While Sarah is often credited as being one of the pioneers of Toronto’s local-floral Renaissance, she is quick to praise Natasa for her work popularizing Ontario’s vibrant floral agriculture landscape among Torontonians. “It has been fantastic. Every year, more and more people hear about the Toronto Flower Market and mark it on their calendars.”

While the Market “is a rite of passage for local growers,” Sarah says it has helped more than smaller and newer floral businesses.

“There are some big, commercial enterprises and greenhouses who participate. Before Natasa started the Market, it was really hard for people who weren’t florists to get their hands on these local flowers, except for maybe at a farmers’ market. What she has created is a bridge between consumers and growers.”



Interactive “build your own bouquet” displays entice shoppers to engage with and appreciate locally-grown Ontario flowers.

ago, though, everybody in the industry told me my idea was impossible and crazy.” She’s proven that there is plenty to fill her clients’ vases on a 12-month basis, drawing from Ontario’s robust greenhouse cut flower industry and small-scale boutique flower farms that provide unique field-grown floral crops.

“I learned about the Toronto Flower Market when I was doing my research to start **Wild North Flowers**, and that was a huge part of why I felt confident that my business could work as a 100 percent Ontario-grown model,” Jennifer explains.

“After learning about the **Slow Flowers Movement** in the states, I hadn’t

THE LOCAL FLOWER COLLECTIVE



Buckets of Ontario flowers make their way to the new wholesale Collective.

really seen it here. So it was a big encouragement for me to see Natasa going full in with her Ontario-grown flowers and pushing that mandate.”

At the TFM, Jennifer showcases \$20 to \$30 vase arrangements to reinforce her designer aesthetic and to differentiate from wrapped or tied bouquets. Wild North Flowers also sells potted plants, catering to local condo and apartment dwellers.

“It’s great to build in-person relationships with our customers there, especially since we don’t have a storefront. The market is buzzing and the flowers are exploding so everyone’s excited,” she says.

Jennifer credits Natasa’s innovation and personal drive for the success of TFM. “Natasa is part of the newer generation in the floral industry and very social media-savvy. This market became so successful so quickly and she’s become the unofficial floral ambassador in Toronto – an obvious connector between people. The Market itself is very busy and it’s a great day for revenue, but really, for me, it’s not about that. It’s about being aligned with the Toronto Flower Market, being (listed) on the website and having the connection with Natasa when new opportunities come up.” ■

Details:

Toronto Flower Market
2018 Dates continue through October 20, 2018.
torontoflowermarket.ca

A Floral Convergence

Centralized location allows sales to bloom for flower farmers and florists.

The Toronto Flower Market is a flower lover’s event that connects consumers with flower farmers and florists several times during the season.

And that gave two Toronto area florists the impetus to act on a dream that they and their fellow floral designers had wished for -- a farmer-to-florist hub in the city for sourcing botanical ingredients from Ontario’s flower farms.

Jaimie Reeves of Leaf & Bloom and Carrie Fisher of Roadside Florist, two wedding and event designers, were already sharing studio space when they lost their lease to redevelopment. “It sounds a little strange, two florists in the same business working together in the same space, but it actually was to both of our advantages,” Jaimie explains.

So, when the two women found a 2,000-square-foot studio in the city – a much larger and costlier space than their original studio – they asked, “how can we make this work for us?” The idea of a centralized drop-off/pick-up spot where flower farmers located as far as two hours outside Toronto could bring their harvest each week – and where local florists could reliably purchase buckets of just-picked stems – took hold with just a few phone calls and brainstorming meetings over the winter.

With input from Jessica Gale of Sweet Gale Gardens, a flower farmer and designer who was plugged in to the local flower-farming scene, plans quickly took shape. Jaimie recalls, “Support was almost unanimous from the start. It’s something I knew a lot of people wanted in the floral community and because it operates out of the studio that Carrie and I share, the overhead is very low. We figured it could grow from there.”

On May 9, just before Mother’s Day, The Local Flower Collective opened for business, with a membership of 11 flower farms and 32 florists. Flower farmers who once devoted a day of personally delivering flowers to dozens of florists in Toronto now simply drop off buckets of blooms at the studio. Florists can pick up their pre-orders and peruse extra offerings to find unexpected seasonal blooms that catch their eyes.

Florists and growers pay an annual fee to join The Local Flower Collective. Florist-members receive privileges to rent the studio and use cooler space for event production or workshops. Nonmember florists are also invited to shop at the Collective for a \$15-day pass. The income generated from these dues and fees pays for a Collective staff member who facilitates the day-of logistics and handles administrative and social media tasks. Right now, the Collective is open on Wednesdays, but Jaimie and Carrie have established other short delivery/pickup hours to accommodate their members.

Most florists pre-order from weekly crop availability lists that farmers are responsible for sending to the members. The majority of transactions occur between individual flower farmers and their florist clients, although the Collective will handle sales of excess flowers for a small commission.

Flower connections are taking place in wonderful new ways, and that makes Jaimie declare the new wholesale hub an early success. “Florists are getting to see all of the growers’ products now; and that leads to new business for everyone. Having their flowers delivered right to our door is fantastic. We get to see firsthand what everyone is growing and it’s a good win.”

Details:

The Local Flower Collective
thelocalflowercollective.com
[@thelocalflowercollective](https://www.instagram.com/thelocalflowercollective)